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**Continuum:
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Performance Theory Australia

Edited by Brian Shoesmith & Alec McHoul

Alec McHoul: Review of

**Missing in Action: Australian Popular Music in Perspective,
Volume 1, edited by Marcus Breen (Kensington: Verbal
Graphics, 1987).**

With broad-ranging collections like this, it's often difficult to make an overall assessment. But the genre of the review makes exactly this demand, so....

It's a desktop job, in a promised series of books - quite nicely produced given the pre-Ventura, pre-Pagemaker technology it uses - but suffering from the inevitable poor copyediting, typos and problems with layout consistency. In terms of content, it's definitely a curate's egg - but by no means a pig's breakfast. What does make me suspicious about the quality of the overall project, though, is that I most liked the articles on subjects and musics about which I happen know least. And I wonder how good they would be to fans.

So I found Eric Watson's insights into the distinctions between 'traditional' and 'progressive' country music highly informative while Warren Fahey's piece contrasting 'authentic Australian' with 'imported' folk music is, for me, just another boring personal polemic on a theme so moribund it's barely raised even by the most died-in-the-wool folkies anymore. I couldn't even bring myself to touch the subject when I was folk music columnist on The Townsville Daily Bulletin! Likewise, Gina Schien's interviews with women rock musicians are insightful and poignant because they are rare and new, whereas Breen's own jazz interviews are, by comparison, a little stuffy. They treat well-worn themes and will probably fail to grab you unless you happen to have an interest in how these themes are articulated within highly localised and specific jazz circles. I was constantly reminded of the standard Guitar Player question about string-gauges: dead boring in 99.9% of cases, coming to life only if your particular hero is being interviewed.

So this is, at its best, going to be a good book for outsiders to learn by. The less you know the better you'll find it and I'll probably send my copy to my brother who's a muso in Liverpool. If you have a general knowledge of popular music in Australia, it's going to be just a catalogue or rehash of some tired old stuff. Along with this, there's also a bit of a propensity to whinge. Predictably, Fahey whinges about 'importations' whatever those are. Watson bemoans the end of the

Australian bush ballad tradition at the hands of Nashville. Paul Madigan gets very upset about the loss of an authentic rock 'voice' in Australia - 'the triumph of gadgets and gimmicks over poetry and song' (p.114). Even the most serious attempt at an analytical article in the book, by Michael Birch, has a grim '60s nostalgia about it: a heartfelt but misplaced desire for postmodern critics to cease their forays into what Birch considers the paragon of authentic periods for rock politics. Let's have a look at this paper in slightly more detail since it's far from the worst in the book.

Birch begins: 'It's becoming hard for some of us to remember our own past' (p.147) - though there is an equally clichéd view that if you remember the '60s, you weren't there! The period, he opines, has 'finally become fit prey for the academic culture, who analyses statistically, psychoanalytically, in terms of "generational specificity" ... and in terms of academic languages hardly any of us understand, or want to'. Who are 'us' and 'them' here? The culprits, it seems, 'were about 10 in 1969'. Unfortunately perhaps, I was 17 in that post-Pepper post-summer-of-something year, albeit ten years younger than Paul McCartney - but I still find it hard to share Birch's enthusiasm for the authentic politics of it all. Lennon was busily chanting, re. 'Revolution', '. . .don't you know that you can count me out'. The change was all ephemeral, in heads and not hands, forgotten in the morning. May '68 had failed by and large and it had certainly failed to have a rock equivalent. The freedom being espoused was a commercialised individualism. And I could go on. Only eighteen months later, in February 1971, Lennon himself told Rolling Stone that: The dream is over. It's just the same only I'm thirty and a lot of people have got long hair, that's all.... Nothing happening except that we grew up; we did our thing just like they were telling us. Most of the so-called Now Generation are getting jobs and all of that.

There was a cartoon showing acre on acre of pinstripe-suited bankers and businessmen, all downing cocktails with cherries on sticks and paper umbrellas. The caption read: 'Woodstock Reunion'. That same year, 1971, in my second year at university, albeit at some remove from Birch's Cambridge, I had the same enthusiasm for the Birmingham school he has now. You could even get WPCS on the newsstands. But to use it in the late 80s as a serious analytic tool, and in Australia (though Australia is still only an afterthought for Birch, a coda), is nothing less than a silly anachronism. To be fair though, it must be remembered that Birch, according to the bio-blurb, 'is an avid collector of old books' (p.228).

For all this, there is nevertheless a central point where Birch turns interestingly to matters of technique and technology - though he refuses a strict determinism and provides a pretty useful sketch for a larger work on the relations between technology, music and cultural change. The Marshall stack and the solid-body Fender bass, the Moog and the DX-7: these might turn out to have been the real 'stars' all along, regardless of whose hands they were in. Is that possible? - a machinic account of musical change? But then, as if not to lose his tiresome humanistic 'roots', he immediately folds this crucial point back into his central whinge: 'audiences listening to a single man singing through even a bad microphone, like Elvis, respond more personally than to a synthesiser band organised as an army of electronic technicians'(p.155). The apropos historical-analytical points were made, it turns out, not for their own sake but only to prolong a kind of Luddite fantasy.

Could this be - like when Dylan went electric, or something? If there's anything worse than a case of what Frank Zappa calls 'a bunch of old guys sitting around

playing rock'n'roll' it has to be an old guy on his own not playing it but acting like he should have - once - and writing confessions about it. I'm starting to wonder whether there's much difference between Warren Fahey's pointless hagiography of the 'old timers' (p.33) and Birch's similar attachment to The Who et al.

Point is: for Birch 'the "political role" of popular music seems to have disappeared' (p.162) because today, for example, 'The Animals' "House of the Rising Sun" becomes just another performed song before something by AC/ DC, and after something by Madonna' (p.161). In the 1960s it was just as likely to have been preceded by The Pretty Things and followed by Herman's bloody Hermits. So is there any point in this? Obviously, the political as such doesn't simply go away simply because a particular mode of (largely lyrical, and even then dubious) intervention into the political by a few (largely British) musicians came to an end almost twenty years ago. It remains. The failure is entirely with Birch's own inflexible concept of the political. And, even if this were allowed, to call that spaced-out decade of misogyny and bourgeois individualism politically 'authentic' is an extraordinary feat of nomenclature.

So much for Birch and his 'whingeing lament for "good old days"' (p.161). The rest of the text has fewer and lesser academic and analytic pretensions. In fact, passing over the useful for-the-record descriptions of public radio (Steve Warne) and rock journalism (Marcus Breen, again), the best writings are the most writerly, 'creative' pieces two confessions by Paul Madigan and Noel Giblett both of which have a distinctly Perth-based character. Both are anti-glamour accounts of failure in the rock industry. They open up as texts beyond both analysis and silly fandom and into some attempts to merge the genres of ethnography and memoir. And they do so much more successfully indeed than Breen's own opening attempt to equate his Baptist background with the early roots of rock'n'roll itself. (In Breen's case, the ontogenetic/phylogenetic parallelism works, it must be said, slightly better than what must be the oddest ever in Australian popular culture: this month's amazing Time Australia article comparing Elle (The Body) Macpherson with the land of Oz her- him- or itself!)

By comparison, Madigan and Giblett are attempting to write from 'inside' their own specific and difficult immersions in the business. Rather than holding embattled positions within the pop culture theory industry, they have only personal and local axes to grind within the pop music industry itself - hence some concrete reasons for Madigan's Luddite position. The scenes are painful: flirting and then brawling with the Musicians' Union, travelling in the roadies' van across the Nullarbor while the big shots go by limo, the constant come-ons and 'Nos' from record producers, the tales of accounts rendered and not rendered, rip-offs by booking agents and managers, trying to get tapes heard 'over east', to mention only a few. This is easily the best stuff in the book with names and hotels named: the point where it ceases to try to be what it cannot - a cogent academic analysis.

There is no rock musicology in this text. [1] Instead, a kind of nostalgia for the Melody Maker days when you could just write anything you liked about music from inside or out - because, then, it was not to be taken too seriously. The crisis comes, now, when it is to be taken seriously but methods for doing so have yet to be developed. That's the paradox Missing in Action faces - or doesn't as you please.

Perhaps Missing in Action shows most clearly that there is still to be a kind of writing on pop which is more than and different from pop writing. [2] In the

meantime and, paradoxically, towards that very end, it's probably as well to concentrate on doing the latter - pop writing - and doing it well, without pretensions, and having ... dare I write? ... fun. To have fun, to play, in and as the writing, might be more of a political challenge than the Birch Boys can see, as they rush to chastise contemporary rock music for failing to engage with politics while never asking the same question about their own academic cultural production.

Oh and there's also an article in this book by Philip Brophy on avant garde rock. *Zzzzzzzzzz*.

Notes

1. See for a highly contrasting text, David Hatch and Stephen Millward, *From Blues to Rock: An Analytical History of Pop Music*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987.
2. See Anthony May and Alec McHoul, 'Pop writing/writing pop', a review article to appear in *Southern Review*, 1989.